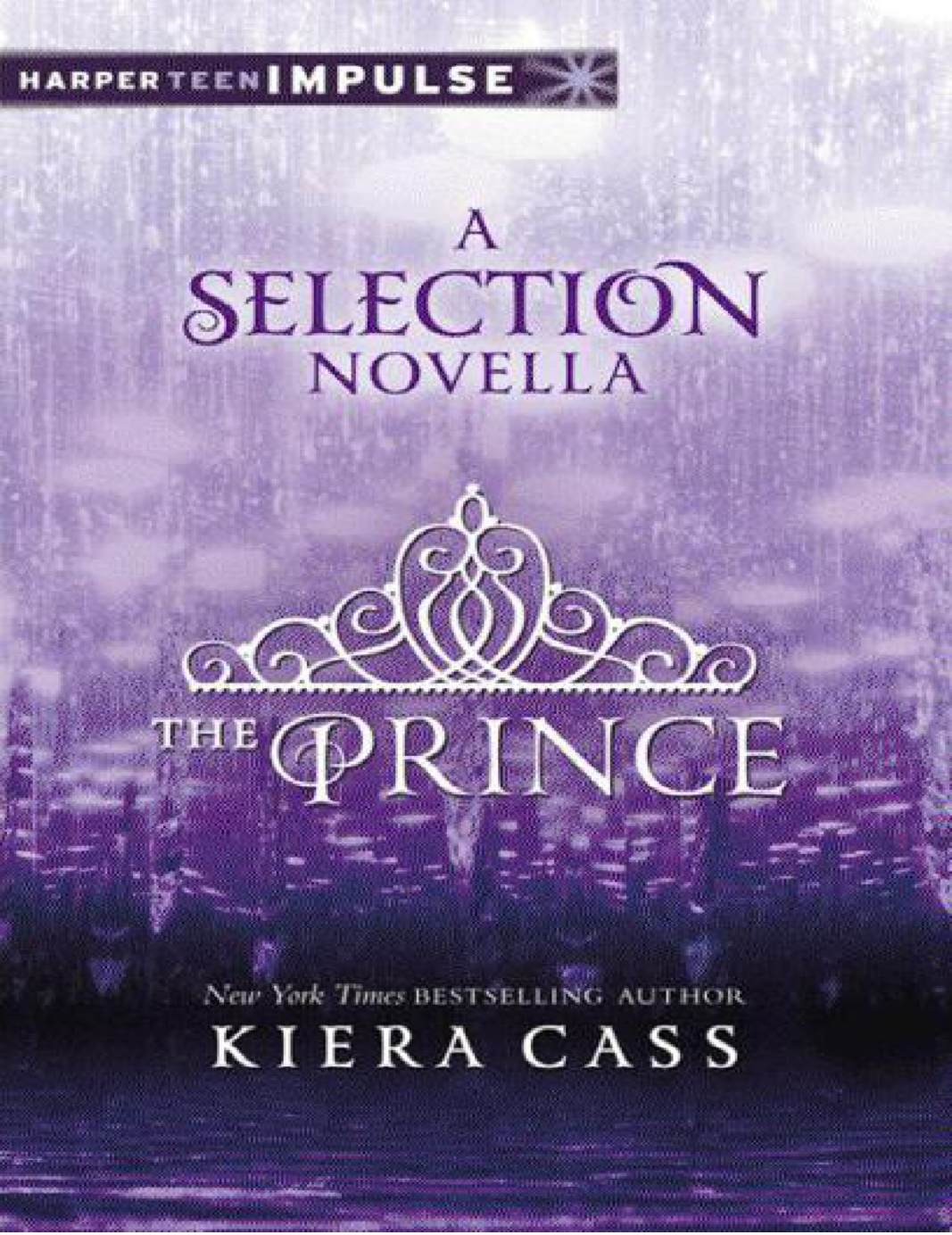

HARPER TEEN IMPULSE
A
SELECTION
NOVELLA
THE PRINCE
New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KIERA CASS



THE PRINCE

A SELECTION NOVELLA



KIERA CASS

HARPER TEEN
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CHAPTER 1

I PACED THE FLOOR, TRYING to walk the anxiety out of my body. When the Selection was something in the distance—a possibility for my future—it sounded thrilling. But now? Well, I wasn't so sure.

The census had been compiled, the figures checked multiple times. The palace staff was being reallocated, wardrobe preparations were being made, and rooms were being readied for our new guests. The momentum was building, exciting and terrifying in one fell swoop.

For the girls, the process started once they filled out the forms—thousands must have done so by this point. For me, it started tonight.

I was nineteen. Now, *I* was eligible.

Stopping in front of my mirror, I checked my tie again. There would be more eyes watching than usual tonight, and I needed to look like the self-confident prince everyone was expecting. Finding no fault, I left for my father's study.

I nodded at advisors and familiar guards along the way. It was hard to imagine that in less than two weeks, these halls would be flooded with girls. My knock was firm, a request made by Father himself. It seemed there was always a lesson for me to learn.

Knock with authority, Maxon.

Stop pacing all the time, Maxon.

Be faster, smarter, better, Maxon.

"Come in."

I entered the study, and Father briefly moved his eyes from his reflection to acknowledge me. "Ah, there you are. Your mother will be along shortly. Are you ready?"

"Of course," I replied. There was no other acceptable answer.

He reached over and grabbed a small box, placing it in front of me on his desk. "Happy birthday."

I pulled back the silvery paper, revealing a black box. Inside were new cuff links. He was probably too consumed to remember that he'd gotten me cuff links for Christmas. Perhaps that was part of the job. Maybe I'd accidentally get my son the same gift twice when I was king. Of course, to get that far I'd need a wife first.

Wife. I let the word play on my lips without actually saying it

aloud. It felt too foreign.

"Thank you, sir. I'll wear them now."

"You'll want to be at your best tonight," he said, tearing himself away from the mirror. "The Selection will be on everyone's thoughts."

I gave him a tight smile. "Mine included." I debated telling him how anxious I was. He'd been through this, after all. He must have had his own doubts once upon a time.

Evidently, my nerves read on my face.

"Be positive, Maxon. This is meant to be exciting," he urged.

"It is. I'm just a bit shocked at how fast it's all happening." I focused on lacing the metal through the holes on my sleeves.

He laughed. "It seems fast to you, but it's been years in the making on my end."

I narrowed my eyes, looking up from my task. "What do you mean?"

The door opened then, and my mother walked in. In typical fashion, Father lit up for her. "Amberly, you look stunning," he said, going to greet her.

She smiled in that way she always did, as if she couldn't believe anyone would notice her, and embraced my father. "Not too stunning, I hope. I wouldn't want to steal attention." Letting Father go, she came and held me tight. "Happy birthday, son."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Your gift is coming," she whispered, then turned back to Father. "Are we all ready, then?"

"Indeed we are." He held out an arm, she took it, and I walked in their shadows. As always.

"About how much longer is it, Your Majesty?" one reporter asked. The light of the video cameras was hot in my face.

"The names are drawn this Friday, and the girls will actually arrive the Friday after that," I answered.

"Are you nervous, sir?" a new voice called.

"About marrying a girl I haven't met yet? All in a day's work." I winked, and the watching crowd chuckled.

"Doesn't it set you on edge at all, Your Majesty?"

I gave up trying to align the question with a face. I just answered in the general direction it came from, hoping to get it right. "On the contrary, I'm very excited." *Sort of*.

"We know you'll make an excellent choice, sir." A camera flash blinded me.

"Hear, hear!" others called.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Any girl who settles for me can't possibly be a sane woman."

They laughed again, and I took that as a good stopping point.

“Forgive me, I have family visiting, and I don’t wish to be rude.”

Turning my back to the reporters and photographers, I took a deep breath. Was the whole evening going to be like this?

I looked around the Great Room—the tables covered in dark blue cloths, the lights burning brightly to show the splendor—and I saw there wasn’t much of an escape for me. Dignitaries in one corner, reporters in another—no place I could just be quiet and still. Considering the fact that I was the person being celebrated, one would think that *I* could choose the way in which it happened. It never seemed to work out that way.

No sooner had I escaped the crowd than my father’s arm came swooping across my back and gripped my shoulder. The pressure and sudden attention made me tense.

“Smile,” he ordered beneath his breath, and I obeyed as he dipped his head in the direction of some of his special guests.

I caught the eye of Daphne, here from France with her father. It was lucky that the timing of the party lined up with our fathers needing to discuss the ongoing trade agreement. As the French king’s daughter, our paths had crossed time and time again, and she was perhaps the only person I knew outside of my family with any degree of consistency. It was nice to have one familiar face in the room.

I gave her a nod, and she raised her glass of champagne.

“You can’t answer everything so sarcastically. You’re the crowned prince. They need you to lead.” His hand on my shoulder was tighter than necessary.

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s a party, I thought—”

“Well, you thought wrong. By the *Report*, I expect to see you taking this seriously.”

He stopped walking and faced me, his eyes gray and steady.

I smiled again, knowing he’d want that for the sake of the crowd. “Of course, sir. A temporary lapse in judgment.”

He let his arm drop and pulled his glass of champagne to his lips. “You tend to have a lot of those.”

I risked a peek at Daphne and rolled my eyes, at which she laughed, knowing all too well what I was feeling. Father’s gaze followed my eyes across the room.

“Always a pretty one, that girl. Too bad she couldn’t be in the lottery.”

I shrugged. “She’s nice. I never had feelings for her, though.”

“Good. That would have been extraordinarily stupid of you.”

I dodged the slight. “Besides, I’m looking forward to meeting my true options.”

He jumped on the idea, driving me forward once again. “It’s about time you made some real choices in your life, Maxon. Some good

ones. I'm sure you think my methods are far too harsh, but I need you to see the significance of your position."

I held back a sigh. *I've tried to make choices. You don't really trust me to.*

"Don't worry, Father. I take the task of choosing a wife quite seriously," I answered, hoping my tone gave him some assurance of how much I meant that.

"It's a lot more than finding someone you get along with. For instance, you and Daphne. Very chummy, but she'd be a complete waste." He took another swig, waving at someone behind me.

Again, I controlled my face. Uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, I put my hands in my pockets and scanned the space. "I should probably make my rounds."

He waved me away, turning his attention back to his drink, and I left quickly. Try as I might, I wasn't sure what that whole interaction meant. There was no reason for him to be so rude about Daphne when she wasn't even an option.

The Great Room buzzed with excitement. People told me that all of Illéa had been waiting for this moment: the excitement of the new princess, the thrill of me as a soon-to-be king. For the first time, I felt all of that energy and worried it would crush me.

I shook hands and graciously accepted gifts that I didn't need. I quietly asked one of the photographers about his lens, and kissed cheeks of family and friends and my fair share of complete strangers.

Finally I found myself alone for a moment. I surveyed the crowd, sure there was somewhere I ought to be. My eyes found Daphne, and I started walking toward her. I was looking forward to just a few minutes of genuine conversation, but it would have to wait.

"Are you having fun?" Mom asked, stepping into my path.

"Does it look like I am?"

She ran her hands over my already-crisp suit. "Yes."

I smiled. "That's all that really matters."

She tilted her head, a gentle smile on her own face. "Come with me for a second."

I held an arm out for her, which she happily took, and we walked out into the hallway to the sound of cameras clicking.

"Can we do something a bit smaller next year?" I asked.

"Not likely. You'll almost certainly be married by then. Your wife might want to have a rather elaborate celebration your first year together."

I frowned, something I could get away with in front of her. "Maybe she'll like things quiet, too."

She laughed softly. "Sorry, honey. Any girl who puts her name in for the Selection is looking for a way *out* of quiet."

“Were you?” I wondered aloud. We never talked about her coming here. It was a strange divide between us, but one that I cherished: I was raised in the palace, but she chose to come.

She stopped and faced me, her expression warm. “I was smitten with the face I saw on TV. I daydreamed about your father the same way thousands of girls daydream about you.”

I pictured her as a young girl in Honduragua, her hair braided back as she gazed longingly at the television. I could see her sighing every time he had to speak.

“All girls dream of what it would be like to be a princess,” she added. “To be swept off their feet and wear a crown . . . it’s all I could think about the week before the names were drawn. I didn’t realize that it was so much more than that.” Her face grew a little sad. “I couldn’t guess at the pressure I’d be under or how little privacy I’d have. Still, to be married to your father, to have had you.” She swept her hand down my cheek. “This is all those dreams made real.”

She held my gaze, smiling, but I could see tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. I had to get her talking again.

“So you have no regrets, then?”

She shook her head. “Not a one. The Selection changed my life, and I mean that in the best way possible. Which is what I want to talk to you about.”

I squinted. “I’m not sure I understand.”

She sighed. “I was a Four. I worked in a factory.” She held out her hands. “My fingers were dry and cracked, and dirt was caked under my nails. I had no alliances, no status, nothing worthy of making me a princess . . . and yet, here I am.”

I stared, still unsure of her point.

“Maxon, this is my gift to you. I promise I will make every effort to see these girls through your eyes. Not the eyes of a queen, or the eyes of your mother, but yours. Even if the girl you choose is of a very low caste, even if others think she has no value, I will always listen to your reasons for wanting her. And I will do my best to support your choice.”

After a pause, I understood. “Did Father not have that? Did you not?”

She pulled herself up. “Every girl will come with pros and cons. Some people will choose to focus on the worst in some of your options and the best in others, and it will make no sense to you why they seem so narrow minded. But I’m here for you, whatever your choice.”

“You always have been.”

“True,” she said, taking my arm. “And I know I’m about to play second fiddle to another woman, as I should. But my love for you will never change, Maxon.”

“Nor mine for you.” I hoped she could hear the sincerity in my voice. I couldn’t imagine a circumstance that would dim my absolute adoration of her.

“I know.” With a little nudge, she pushed us back to the party.

As we entered the room to smiles and applause, I considered my mother’s words. She was, beyond anyone I knew, incredibly generous. It was a trait I endeavored to adopt myself. So if this was her gift, it must be more necessary than I could understand at the present. My mother never gave a gift thoughtlessly.

CHAPTER 2

PEOPLE LINGERED MUCH LATER THAN I thought was appropriate. That was another sacrifice that came with the privilege, I guessed: no one wanted a palace party to end. Not even when the palace wanted it to.

I'd placed the very drunk dignitary from the German Federation into the care of a guard, thanked all the royal advisors for their gifts, and kissed the hand of nearly every lady who walked through the palace doors. In my eyes, my duty here was done, and I just wanted to spend a few hours in peace. But as I went to escape the lingering partygoers, I was happily stopped by a pair of dark blue eyes.

"You've been avoiding me," Daphne said, her tone playful and the lilt of her accent tickling my ears. There was always something musical about the way she spoke.

"Not at all. It was bit more crowded than I thought it would be." I looked back at the handful of people still intent on seeing the sun rise through the palace windows.

"Your father, he enjoys making a spectacle."

I laughed. Daphne seemed to understand so many things that I'd never said out loud. Sometimes that made me nervous. Just how much about me could she see without me knowing? "He outdid himself, I think."

She shrugged. "Only until next time."

We stood there in silence, though I sensed she wanted to say more. Biting her lip, she whispered to me. "Could I speak to you in private?"

I nodded, giving her my arm and escorting her to one of the parlors down the hall. She was quiet, saving her words until I shut the doors behind us. Though we often talked in private, the way she was acting made me uneasy.

"You didn't dance with me," she said, sounding hurt.

"I didn't dance at all." Father insisted upon classical musicians this time. While the Fives were very talented, the music they played lent themselves to slower dances. Maybe, if I had wanted to dance, I would have chosen to dance with her. It just felt wrong with everyone asking me questions about my future mystery wife.

She let out a breathy sigh and paced the room. “I’m supposed to go on this date when I get home,” she said. “Frederick—that’s his name. I’ve seen him before, of course. He’s an excellent rider, and very handsome, too. He’s four years older than me, but I think that’s one of the reasons Papa likes him.”

She looked over her shoulder at me, a little smile on her face.

I gave her a sarcastic grin in return. “And where would we be without our fathers’ approval?”

She giggled. “Lost, of course. We’d have no idea how to live.”

I laughed back, grateful for someone to joke about it with. It was the only way to deal with it sometimes.

“But yes, Papa approves. Still, I wonder . . .” She dropped her eyes to the floor, suddenly shy.

“You wonder what?”

She stood there a moment, her gaze still focused on the carpet. Finally she focused those deep blue eyes on me. “Do you approve?”

“Of what?”

“Frederick.”

I laughed. “I can’t really say, can I? I’ve never met him.”

“No,” she said, her voice dropping. “Not about the person, but the idea. Do you approve of me dating this man? Possibly marrying him?”

Her face was stone, covering something I didn’t understand. I gave a bewildered shrug. “It’s not my place to approve. It’s hardly even yours,” I added, feeling a bit sad for the both of us.

Daphne twisted her hands together, like she was maybe nervous or hurting. What was happening here?

“So it doesn’t bother you at all, then? Because if it’s not Frederick, it’ll be Antoine. And if it’s not Antoine, it’ll be Garron. There’s a string of men waiting for me, none of them half the friend to me that you are. But, eventually, I’ll have to take one as a husband, and you don’t care?”

That was gloomy indeed. We scarcely saw each other more than three times in a year. And I might say she was my closest friend, too. How pathetic were we?

I swallowed, searching for the right thing to say. “I’m sure it will all work out.”

With no warning whatsoever, tears began streaming down Daphne’s face. I looked around the room, trying to find an explanation or solution, feeling more and more uncomfortable every moment.

“Please tell me you’re not going to follow through with this, Maxon. You can’t,” she pleaded.

“What are you talking about?” I asked desperately.

“The Selection! Please, don’t marry some stranger. Don’t make *me* marry some stranger.”

“I have to. That’s how it works for princes of Illéa. We marry commoners.”

Daphne rushed forward, grabbing my hands. “But I love you. I always have. Please don’t marry some other girl without at least asking your father if I could be a choice.”

Loved me? Always?

I choked over words, trying to find the right place to start. “Daphne, how . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll ask your father,” she pleaded, wiping away her tears hopefully. “Postpone the Selection long enough for us to at least see if it’s worth trying. Or let me enter, too. I’ll give up my crown.”

“Please stop crying,” I whispered.

“I can’t! Not when I’m about to lose you forever.” She buried her head in her hands, sobbing quietly.

I stood there, stone-like, terrified I would make this worse. After a few tense moments, she raised her head. She spoke, staring at nothing.

“You’re the only person who really knows me. The only person I feel I truly know myself.”

“Knowledge isn’t love,” I contradicted.

“That’s not true, Maxon. We have a history together, and it’s about to be broken. All for the sake of tradition.” She kept her eyes focused on some invisible space in the center of the room, and I couldn’t guess what she was thinking now. Clearly, I was oblivious to her thoughts in general.

Finally Daphne turned her face to me. “Maxon, I beg of you, ask your father. Even if he says no, at least I’ll have done everything I could.”

Positive that I already knew this to be true, I told her what I must. “You already have, Daphne. This is it.” I held out my arms for a moment and let them drop. “This is all it could ever be.”

She held my gaze for a long time, knowing as I did that asking my father for such an outrageous request was beyond anything I could truly get away with. I saw her search her mind for an alternative path, but she quickly saw there wasn’t one. She was a servant to her crown, I was a servant to mine, and our masters would never cross.

As she nodded, her face crumpled into tears again. She wandered over to a couch and sat down, holding herself. I stayed still, hoping to not cause her any more grief. I longed to make her laugh, but there wasn’t anything funny about this. I hadn’t known I was capable of breaking a heart.

I certainly didn’t like it.

Just then I realized this was about to become common. I would dismiss thirty-four women over the next few months. What if they all reacted this way?

I huffed, exhausted at the thought.

At the sound, she looked up. Slowly, the expression on her face changed.

"Doesn't this hurt you at all?" she demanded. "You're not that good an actor, Maxon."

"Of course it bothers me."

She stood, silently assessing me. "But not for the same reasons it bothers me," she whispered. She walked across the room, her eyes pleading. "Maxon, you love me."

I stayed still.

"Maxon," she said more forcefully, "you love me. You do."

I had to look away, the intensity in her eyes too bright for me. I ran a hand through my hair, trying to put whatever it was I did feel into words.

"I've never seen anyone express their feelings the way you just did. I have no doubt you mean every word, but I can't do that, Daphne."

"That doesn't mean you don't know how to feel it. You just have no idea how to express it. Your father can be as cold as ice, and your mother hides within herself. You've never seen people love freely, so you don't know how to show it. But you feel it; I know you do. You love me as I love you."

Slowly, I shook my head, fearing another syllable out of my mouth would start everything up again.

"Kiss me," she demanded.

"What?"

"Kiss me. If you can kiss me and still say you don't love me, I'll never mention this again."

I backed away. "No. I'm sorry, I can't."

I didn't want to confess how literal that was. I wasn't sure how many boys Daphne had kissed, but I knew it was more than zero. She'd let the fact she'd been kissed come out a few summers ago when I was in France with her. So there. She had me beat, and there was no way I was going to make an even bigger fool out of myself in this moment.

Her sadness shifted to anger as she backed away from me. She laughed once, no humor in her eyes.

"So this is your answer, then? You're saying no? You're choosing to let me leave?"

I shrugged.

"You're an idiot, Maxon Schreave. Your parents have completely sabotaged you. You could have a thousand girls set before you, and it wouldn't matter. You're too stupid to see love when it stands right in front of you."

She wiped her eyes and straightened her dress. "I hope to God I

never see your face again."

The fear in my chest changed, and as she walked away, I grabbed her arm. I didn't want her to be gone forever.

"Daphne, I'm sorry."

"Don't feel sorry for me," she said coldly. "Feel sorry for yourself. You'll find a wife because you have to, but you've already known love and let it go."

She jerked free and left me alone.

Happy birthday to me.

CHAPTER 3

DAPHNE SMELLED LIKE CHERRY BARK and almonds. She'd been wearing the same scent since she turned thirteen. She had it on last night, and I could smell it even as she was wishing she'd never see me again.

She had a scar on her wrist, a scrape she got climbing a tree when she was eleven. It was my fault. She was a bit less ladylike at the time, and I convinced her—well, *challenged* her—to race me to the top of one of the trees on the edge of the garden. I won.

Daphne had a crippling fear of the dark, and since I had fears of my own, I never teased her for it. And she never teased me. Not on anything that really mattered anyway.

She was allergic to shellfish. Her favorite color was yellow. Try as she may, she could not sing to save her life. She could dance, though, so it was probably even more of a disappointment that I didn't ask her to last night.

When I was sixteen she sent me a new camera bag for Christmas. Even though I'd never given any indication that I wanted to get rid of the one I had, it meant so much to me that she was aware of my likes, and I switched it out anyway. I still used it.

I stretched beneath my sheets, turning my head toward where the bag rested. I wondered how much time she'd spent picking out the right one.

Maybe Daphne was right. We had more history than I'd recognized. We'd lived our relationship through scattered visits and sporadic phone calls, so I never would have dreamed it added up to as much as it truly did.

And now she was on a plane back to France, where Frederick was waiting for her.

I climbed out of bed, shrugged off my rumpled shirt and suit pants, and made my way to the shower. As the water washed away the remnants of my birthday, I tried to dismiss my thoughts.

But I couldn't shelve her nagging accusation about the state of my heart. Did I not know love at all? Had I tasted it and cast it off? And if so, how was I supposed to navigate the Selection?

Advisors ran around the palace with stacks of entry forms for the Selection, smiling at me like they knew something I didn't. From time to time, one would pat me on the back or whisper an encouraging remark, as if they sensed that I was suddenly doubting the one thing in my life I'd always counted on, the one thing I hoped for.

"Today's batch is very promising," one would say.

"You're a lucky man," another commented.

But as the entries piled up, all I could think about was Daphne and her cutting words.

I should have been studying the figures of the financial report before me, but instead I studied my father. Had he somehow sabotaged me? Made it so I was missing a fundamental understanding of what it meant to be in a romantic relationship? I'd seen him interact with my mother. There was affection between them, if not passion. Wasn't that enough? Was that what I was meant to be aiming for?

I stared into space, debating. Maybe he thought that if I sought anything more, I'd have a terrible time traversing the Selection. Or perhaps that I'd be disappointed if I didn't find something life-changing. It was probably for the best that I never mentioned I was hoping for just that.

But maybe he had no such designs. People simply are who they are. Father was strict, a sword sharpened under the pressure of running a country that was surviving constant wars and rebel attacks. Mother was a blanket, softened by growing up with nothing, and ever seeking to protect and comfort.

I knew in my core I was more like her than him. Not something I minded, but Father did.

So maybe making me slow about expressing myself was intentional, part of the process intended to harden me.

You're too stupid to see love when it stands right in front of you.

"Snap out of it, Maxon." I whipped my head toward my father's voice.

"Sir?"

His face was tired. "How many times do I have to tell you? The Selection is about making a solid, rational choice, not another opportunity for you to daydream."

An advisor walked into the room, handing a letter to Father as I straightened the stack of papers, tapping them against the desk. "Yes, sir."

He read the paper, and I looked at him one last time.

Maybe.

No.

At the end of the day, no. He wanted to make me a man, not a

machine.

With a grunt, he crumpled the paper and threw it in the trash. “Damn rebels.”

I spent the better part of the next morning working in my room, away from prying eyes. I felt much more productive when I was alone, and if I wasn’t productive, at least I wasn’t being chastised. I guessed that wouldn’t last all day, based on the invitation I received.

“You called for me?” I asked, stepping into my father’s private office.

“There you are,” Father said, his eyes wide. He rubbed his hands together. “Tomorrow’s the day.”

I drew in a breath. “Yes. Do we need to go over the format for the *Report*?”

“No, no.” He put a hand on my back to move me forward, and I straightened instantly, following his lead. “It’ll be simple enough. Introduction, a little chat with Gavril, and then we’ll broadcast the names and faces of the girls.”

I nodded. “Sounds . . . easy.”

When we reached the edge of his desk, he placed his hand on a thick stack of folders. “These are them.”

I looked down. Stared. Swallowed.

“Now, about twenty-five or so have rather obvious qualities that would be perfect for a new princess. Excellent families, ties to other countries that might be very valuable. Some of them are just extraordinarily beautiful.” Uncharacteristically, he playfully elbowed my rib, and I stepped to the side. None of this was a game. “Sadly, not all of the provinces offered up anyone worth note. So, to make it all appear a bit more random, we used those areas to add in a bit more diversity. You’ll see we got a few Fives in the mix. Nothing below that, though. We have to have *some* standards.”

I played his words in my head again. All this time, I thought it would be fate or destiny . . . but it was just him.

He ran his thumb down the stack, and the edges of the papers smacked together.

“Do you want a peek?” he asked.

I looked at the pile again. Names, photos, and lists of accomplishments. All the essential details were there. Still, I knew for a fact the form didn’t ask anything about what made them laugh or urge them to spill their darkest secret. Here sat a compilation of attributes, not people. And based on those statistics, they were my only choices.

“You chose them?” I pulled my eyes from the papers and looked to him.

"Yes."

"*All* of them?"

"Essentially," he said with a smile. "Like I said, there are a few there for the sake of the show, but I think you've got a very promising lot. Far better than mine."

"Did your father choose for you?"

"Some. But it was different then. Why do you ask?"

I thought back. "This is what you meant, wasn't it? When you said it was years of work on your end?"

"Well, we had to make sure certain girls would be of age, and in some provinces we had several options. But, trust me, you're going to love them."

"Am I?"

Love them? As if he cared. As if this wasn't just another way to push the crown, the palace, and himself ahead.

Suddenly, his offhand comment about Daphne being a waste made sense. He didn't care if I was close to her because she was charming or good company; he cared that she was *France*. Not even a person to him. And since he basically had what he needed from France, she was useless in his eyes. Had she proven valuable, I had no doubt that he would have been willing to throw a beloved tradition out this window.

He sighed. "Don't mope. I thought you'd be excited. Don't you even want to look?"

I straightened my suit coat. "As you've said, this is nothing to daydream over. I'll see them when everyone else does. If you'll excuse me, I need to finish reading the amendment you drafted."

I walked away without waiting for approval, but I felt certain my answer would be a sufficient enough excuse to let me leave.

Maybe it wasn't exactly sabotage, but it certainly felt like a trap. To find one girl I liked out of dozens he handpicked? How was that supposed to happen?

I told myself to calm down. He picked Mom, after all, and she was a wonderful, beautiful, intelligent person. But that happened without this level of interference, it seemed. And things were different now, or so he claimed.

Between Daphne's words, Father's interloping, and my own growing fears, I was dreading the Selection like never before.

CHAPTER 4

WITH JUST FIVE MINUTES TO go before my entire future unfolded in front of me, I found myself prepared to vomit at a moment's notice.

A very kind makeup woman was dabbing sweat off my brow.

"Are you all right, sir?" she asked, moving the cloth.

"I was just lamenting that with all the lipstick you have over there, not a one appears to be my shade." Mom said that sometimes: *not my shade*. Not really sure what it meant.

She giggled, as did Mom and her makeup woman.

"I think I'm good," I told the girl, looking in the mirrors set up in the back of the studio. "Thank you."

"Me, too," Mom said, and the two young women walked away.

I toyed with a container, trying not to think about the passing seconds.

"Maxon, sweetie, are you really okay?" Mom asked, looking not at me but at my reflection. I looked back at hers.

"It's just . . . it's . . ."

"I know. It's nerve-racking for everyone involved, but at the end of the day, it's just hearing the names of a few girls. That's all."

I inhaled slowly and nodded. That was one way to look at it. Names. That was all that was happening. Just a list of names and nothing more.

I drew in another breath.

It was a good thing I hadn't eaten much today.

I turned and walked to my seat on the set, where Father was already waiting.

He shook his head. "Get it together. You look like hell."

"How did you do this?" I begged.

"I faced it with confidence because I was the prince. As will you. Need I remind you that you're the prize?" His face looked tired again, like I ought to have already grasped this. "They're competing for you, not the other way around. Your life isn't changing at all, except you'll have to deal with a couple of overly excited females for a few weeks."

"What if I don't like any of them?"

"Then pick the one you hate the least. Preferably one that's useful.

Don't worry on that count, though; I'll help."

If he intended that to be a calming thought, he failed.

"Ten seconds," someone called, and my mother came to her seat, giving me a comforting wink.

"Remember to smile," Father prompted, and turned to face the cameras confidently.

Suddenly the anthem was playing and people were speaking. I realized I ought to be paying attention, but all of my focus was driven toward keeping a calm and happy expression on my face.

I didn't register much until I heard Gavril's familiar voice.

"Good evening, Your Majesty," he said, and I swallowed in fear before realizing he was addressing my father.

"Gavril, always good to see you."

"Looking forward to the announcement?"

"Ah, yes. I was in the room yesterday as a few were drawn; all very lovely girls." He was so smooth, so natural.

"So you know who they are already?" Gavril asked excitedly.

"Just a few, just a few." A complete fabrication, pulled off with incredible ease.

"Did he happen to share any of this information with you, sir?" Now Gavril was talking to me, the glint from his lapel pin sparkling in the bright lights as he moved.

Father turned to me, his eyes reminding me to smile. I did so and answered.

"Not at all. I'll see them when everyone else does." Ugh, I should have said *the ladies*, not *them*. They were guests, not pets. I discreetly wiped the sweat from my palms on my pants.

"Your Majesty," Gavril said, moving to my mother. "Any advice for the Selected?"

I watched her. How long did it take for her to become so poised, so flawless? Or was she always that way? A bashful tilt of her head and even Gavril melted.

"Enjoy your last night as an average girl. Tomorrow, no matter what, your life will be different forever." *Yes, ladies, yours and mine both.* "And it's old advice, but it's good: be yourself."

"Wise words, my queen, wise words." He turned with a wide sweep of his arm to the cameras. "And with that, let us reveal the thirty-five young ladies chosen for the Selection. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in congratulating the following Daughters of Illéa."

I watched the monitors as the national emblem popped up, leaving a small box in the corner showing my face. What? They were going to watch me the whole time?

Mom put her hand on mine, just out of the sight of the camera. I

breathed in. Then out. Then in again.

Just a bunch of names. Not a big deal. Not like they were announcing one, and she was it.

"Miss Elayna Stoles of Hansport, Three," Gavril read off a card. I worked hard to smile a little brighter. "Miss Tuesday Keeper of Waverly, Four," he continued.

Still looking excited, I bent toward Father. "I feel sick," I whispered.

"Just breathe," he answered back through his teeth. "You should have looked yesterday; I knew it."

"Miss Fiona Castley of Paloma, Three."

I looked over to Mom. She smiled. "Very pretty."

"Miss America Singer of Carolina, Five."

I heard the word *Five* and realized that must have been one of Father's throwaway picks. I didn't even catch the picture, as my new plan was to stare just above the monitors and smile.

"Miss Mia Blue of Ottaro, Three."

It was too much to absorb. I'd learn their names and faces later, when the nation wasn't watching.

"Miss Celeste Newsome of Clermont, Two." I raised my eyebrows, not that I even saw her face. If she was a Two, she must be an important one, so I'd better look impressed.

"Clarissa Kelley of Belcourt, Two."

As the list rolled on, I smiled to the point that my cheeks ached. All I could think of was how much this meant to me—how a huge part of my life was falling into place right now—and I couldn't even rejoice in it. If I'd picked the names myself out of a bowl in a private room, saw their faces on my own, before anyone else, how that would have changed everything in this moment.

These girls were mine, the only thing in the world that might ever truly feel that way.

And then they weren't.

"And there you have it!" Gavril announced. "Those are our beautiful Selection candidates. Over the next week they will be prepared for their trip to the palace, and we will eagerly await their arrival. Tune in next Friday for a special edition of the *Report* devoted exclusively to getting to know these spectacular women. Prince Maxon," he said, turning my way, "I congratulate you, sir. Such a stunning group of young women."

"I'm quite speechless," I replied, not lying in the slightest.

"Don't worry, sir, I'm sure the girls will do most of the talking once they arrive next Friday. And to you"—he spoke to the camera—"don't forget to stay tuned for all the latest Selection updates right here on the Public Access Channel. Good night, Illéa!"

The anthem played, the lights went down, and I finally let my posture relax.

Father stood and gave me a firm and startling pat on the back. “Well done. That was a vast deal better than I thought you’d fare.”

“I have no clue what just happened.”

He laughed along with a handful of advisors who were lingering on set. “I told you, son, you’re the prize. There’s no need to be stressed. Don’t you agree, Amberly?”

“I assure you, Maxon, the ladies have much more to worry about than you do,” she confirmed, rubbing my arm.

“Exactly,” Father said. “Now, I’m starving. Let’s enjoy our last few peaceful meals together.”

I stood, walking slowly, and Mom kept my pace.

“That was a blur,” I whispered.

“We’ll get the photos and applications to you so you can study them at your leisure. It’s just like getting to know anyone. Treat it like spending time with any of your other friends.”

“I don’t have very many friends, Mom.”

She gave me a knowing smile. “Yes, it’s confining in here,” she agreed. “Well, think about Daphne.”

“What about her?” I asked, a bit on edge.

Mom didn’t notice. “She’s a girl, and you two have always been friendly. Pretend it’s just like that.”

I faced forward. Without realizing it, she soothed a huge fear in my heart while stoking another.

Since our fight, whenever I thought about Daphne, it wasn’t about how she might be getting along with Frederick right now, or how much I missed her company. All I thought about were her accusations.

If I was in love with her, certainly it would be all of her attributes that filled my head. Or tonight, as the Selected girls were listed, I would have wished her name were in there somewhere.

Maybe Daphne was right, and I didn’t know how to properly show love. But even if that were the case, I knew with a growing certainty that I didn’t love her.

A corner of my soul rejoiced in knowing that I wasn’t missing out on something. I could enter the Selection with no restraints on my affection. But in another space, I mourned. At least if I had misunderstood my emotions, I could boast at the fact that once upon a time, I’d been in love, that I knew what it felt like. But I still had no clue. I supposed it was always meant to be that way.

CHAPTER 5

IN THE END, I DIDN'T look at the applications. I had a lot of reasons to not bother, but ultimately, I convinced myself it was best if it was a clean slate for all of us once we were introduced. Besides, if Father had pored over all the candidates in detail, maybe I didn't want to.

I held a comfortable distance between the Selection and myself . . . until the event crossed my threshold.

Friday morning, I was walking along the third floor, and I heard the musical laugh of two girls on the open stairwell of the second floor. A perky voice gushed, "Can you believe we're here?" and they burst into giggles again.

I cursed aloud and ran into the closest room, because it had been stressed to me over and over again that I was to meet the girls all at once on Saturday. No one told me why it was so important, but I believed it had something to do with their makeovers. If a Five stepped into the palace without any sort of help, well, I couldn't say she'd have much of a chance. Maybe it was to make everything fair. I discreetly left the room I'd ducked into and went back to my own, trying to forget the incident altogether.

But then a second time as I was walking to drop something off in Father's office, I heard the floating voice of a girl I did not know, and it sent a jolt of anxiety through my entire being. I went back to my room and cleaned all of my camera lenses meticulously and reorganized all my equipment. I busied myself until nightfall, when I knew the girls would be in their rooms, and I could walk.

It was one of those traits that tended to get on Father's nerves. He said it made him nervous that I moved around so much. What could I say? I thought better on my feet.

The palace was quiet. If I didn't know better, I wouldn't have guessed that we had so much company. Maybe things wouldn't be so different if I didn't focus on the change.

As I made my way to the end of the hall, I was faced with all the *what if*s that were plaguing me. What if none of the girls was someone I could love? What if none of them loved me? What if my soul mate was bypassed because someone more valuable was chosen from her

province?

I sat down at the top of the stairs and put my head in my hands. How was I supposed to do this? How was I meant to find someone who I loved, who loved me, who my parents approved of, and the people adored? Not to mention someone who was smart, attractive, and accomplished, someone I could present to all the presidents and ambassadors who came our way.

I told myself to pull it together, to think about the positive *what if*s. What if I had a spectacular time getting to know these ladies? What if they were all charming and funny and beautiful? What if the very girl I cared for the most would appease my father beyond any expectations either of us had? What if my perfect match was lying in her bed right now, hoping the best for me?

Maybe . . . maybe this could be everything I'd dreamed it would be, back before it became all too real. This was my chance to find a partner. For so long, Daphne was the only person I could confide in; no one else quite understood our lives. But now, I could welcome someone else into my world, and it would be better than anything I'd ever had before because . . . because she would be mine.

And I would be hers. We would be there for each other. She would be what my mother was to my father: a source of comfort, the calm that grounded him. And I could be her guide, her protector.

I stood and moved downstairs, feeling confident. I just had to hold on to this feeling. I told myself that this was what the Selection would really be for me. It was hope.

By the time I hit the first floor, I was actually smiling. I wasn't relaxed, exactly, but I was determined.

" . . . outside," someone gasped, the fragile voice echoing down the hallway. What was happening?

"Miss, you need to get back to your room now." I squinted down the hall and saw in a patch of moonlight that a guard was blocking a girl—a girl!—from the doorway. It was dark, so I couldn't make out much of her face, but she had brilliant red hair, like honey and roses and the sun all together.

"Please." She was looking more and more distressed as she stood there shaking. I walked closer, trying to decide what to do.

The guard said something I couldn't make out. I kept walking, trying to make sense of the scene.

"I . . . I can't breathe," she said, falling into the guard's arms as he dropped his staff to catch her. He seemed kind of irritated about it.

"Let her go!" I ordered, finally getting to them. Rules be damned, I couldn't let this girl be hurt.

"She collapsed, Your Majesty," the guard explained. "She wanted to go outside."

I knew the guards were just trying to keep us all safe, but what could I do? “Open the doors,” I commanded.

“But . . . Your Majesty . . .”

I fixed him with a serious gaze. “Open the doors and let her go. Now!”

“Right away, Your Highness.”

The guard by the door went to work opening the lock, and I watched the girl sway slightly in the other’s arms as she tried to stand. The moment the double doors opened, a rush of warm, sweet Angeles wind enveloped us. As soon as she felt it on her bare arms, she was moving.

I went to the door and watched as she staggered through the garden, her bare feet making dull sounds on the smoothed gravel. I’d never seen a girl in a nightgown before, and while this particular young lady wasn’t exactly graceful at the moment, it was still strangely inviting.

I realized the guards were watching her, too, and that bothered me.

“As you were,” I said in a low voice. They cleared their throats and turned back to face the hallway. “Stay here unless I call for you,” I instructed, and walked into the garden.

I had a hard time seeing her, but I could hear her. She was breathing heavily, and sounded almost like she was weeping. I hoped that wasn’t the case. Finally I saw her collapse in the grass with her arms and head resting on a stone bench.

She didn’t seem to notice that I’d approached, so I stood there a moment, waiting for her to look up. After a while I was starting to feel a little awkward. I figured she’d at least want to thank me, so I spoke.

“Are you all right, my dear?”

“I am *not* your dear,” she said angrily as she whipped her head to look at me. She was still hidden by shadows, but her hair flashed in the sliver of moonlight that made its way through the clouds.

Still, face lit or hidden, I got the full intention of her words. Where was the gratitude? “What have I done to offend you? Did I not just give you the very thing you asked for?”

She didn’t answer me, but turned away, back to her crying. Why did women have such a high inclination to tears? I didn’t want to be rude, but I had to ask.

“Excuse me, dear, are you going to keep crying?”

“Don’t call me that! I am no more dear to you than the thirty-four other strangers you have here in your cage.”

I smiled to myself. One of my many worries was that these girls would be in a constant state of presenting the best sides of themselves, trying to impress me. I kept dreading that I’d spend weeks getting to

know someone, think she was the one, and then after the wedding, some new person would come to the surface who I couldn't stand.

And here was one who didn't care who I was. She was scolding me!

I circled her as I thought about what she said. I wondered if my habit of walking would bother her. If it did, would she say so?

"That is an unfair statement. You are all dear to me," I said. Yes, I'd been avoiding anything having to do with the Selection, but that didn't mean the girls weren't precious in my eyes. "It is simply a matter of discovering who shall be the dearest."

"Did you really just use the word *shall*?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm afraid I did," I answered with a chuckle. "Forgive me, it's a product of my education." She muttered something unintelligible. "I'm sorry?"

"It's ridiculous!" she yelled. My, she had a temper. Father must not know much about this one. Certainly, no girl with this disposition would have made it into the pool if he had. It was lucky for her that I was the one who came upon her in her distress, and not him. She would have been sent home about five minutes ago.

"What is?" I inquired, though I was sure she was referencing this very moment. I'd never experienced anything quite like this.

"This contest! The whole thing! Haven't you ever loved anyone at all? Is this really how you want to pick a wife? Are you really so shallow?"

That stung. Shallow? I went to sit on the bench, so it would be easier to talk. I wanted this girl, whoever she was, to understand where I was coming from, what things looked like from my end. I tried not to get distracted by the curve of her waist and hip and leg, even the look of her bare foot.

"I can see how I would seem that way, how this whole thing could seem like it's nothing more than cheap entertainment," I said, nodding. "But in my world, I am very guarded. I don't meet very many women. The ones I do are daughters of diplomats, and we usually have very little to discuss. And that's when we manage to speak the same language."

I smiled, thinking of the awkward moments when I had to sit through long dinners in silence next to young women who I was meant to entertain, and failing dismally because the translators were busy talking politics. I looked to the girl, expecting her to laugh along with me for my trouble. When her tight lips refused to smile, I cleared my throat and moved on.

"Circumstances being what they are," I said, fidgeting with my hands, "I haven't had the opportunity to fall in love." She seemed to forget I wasn't really allowed to until now. Then I was curious. Hoping

I wasn't alone, I voiced my most intimate question. "Have you?"

"Yes," she said. She sounded both proud and sad in a single word.

"Then you have been quite lucky."

I looked at the grass for a moment. I continued on, not wanting to linger on my rather embarrassing lack of experience.

"My mother and father were married this way and are quite happy. I hope to find happiness, too. To find a woman who all of Illéa can love, someone to be my companion and to help entertain the leaders of other nations. Someone who will befriend my friends and be my confidante. I'm ready to find my wife."

Even I could hear the desperation, the hope, the longing. The doubt crept back in. What if no one here could love me?

No, I told myself, *this will be a good thing*.

I looked down at this girl, who seemed desperate in her own way. "Do you really feel like this is a cage?"

"Yes, I do," she breathed. Then, a second later, "Your Majesty."

I laughed. "I've felt that way more than once myself. But, you must admit, it is a very beautiful cage."

"For you," she shot back skeptically. "Fill your beautiful cage with thirty-four other men all fighting over the same thing. See how nice it is then."

"Have there really been arguments over me? Don't you all realize I'm the one doing the choosing?" I didn't know whether to feel excited or worried, but it was interesting to think about. Maybe if someone really wanted me that much, I'd want them, too.

"Actually, that was unfair," she added. "They're fighting over two things. Some fight for you; others fight for the crown. And they all think they've already figured out what to say and do so your choice will be obvious."

"Ah, yes. The man or the crown. I'm afraid some cannot tell the difference." I shook my head and stared into the grass.

"Good luck there," she said comically.

But there was nothing comical about it. Here was another one of my biggest fears being confirmed. Again my curiosity overwhelmed me, though I was sure she would lie.

"Which do you fight for?"

"Actually, I'm here by mistake."

"Mistake?" How was that possible? If she put her name in, and it was drawn, and she willingly came here . . .

"Yes. I sort of—well, it's a long story," she said. I would have to learn what that was all about eventually. "And now . . . I'm here. And I'm not fighting. My plan is to enjoy the food until you kick me out."

I couldn't help myself. I burst out laughing. This girl was the antithesis of everything I'd been expecting. Waiting to be kicked out?

Here for the food? I was, surprisingly, enjoying this. Maybe it would all be as simple as Mom said it would be, and I could get to know the candidates over time, like I did with Daphne.

"What are you?" I asked. She couldn't be more than a Four if she was so excited about the food.

"I'm sorry?" she asked, not catching my meaning.

I didn't want to be insulting, so I started high. "A Two? Three?"

"Five."

So this was one of the Fives. I knew Father wouldn't be thrilled about me being friendly with her, but after all, he was the one who let her in. "Ah, yes, then food would probably be good motivation to stay." I chuckled again, and tried to find out the name of this entertaining young woman. "I'm sorry, I can't read your pin in the dark."

She gave a slight shake of her head. If she asked why I didn't know her name yet I wondered which would sound better: a lie—that I had far too much work to do to put them to memory at the moment—or the truth—that I was so nervous about all this, I'd been putting it off until the last second.

Which I suddenly realized I'd just passed.

"I'm America."

"Well, that's perfect," I said with a laugh. Based on her name alone, I couldn't believe she'd made the cut. That was the name of the old country, a stubborn and flawed land we rebuilt into something strong. Then again, maybe that was why Father let her in: to show he had no fear or worries about our past, even if the rebels clung to it foolishly.

For me, there was something musical about the word. "America, my dear, I do hope you find something in this cage worth fighting for. After all this, I can only imagine what it would be like to see you actually try."

I left the bench and knelt beside her, taking her hand. She was looking at our fingers and not into my eyes, and thank goodness for that. If she were, she'd have seen how absolutely floored I was the first time I finally, truly saw her. The clouds moved at just the right moment, fully lighting her face by the moon. As if it weren't enough that she was willing to stand up to me and clearly unafraid to be herself, she was dazzlingly beautiful.

Underneath thick lashes were eyes blue as ice, something cool to balance out the flames in her hair. Her cheeks were smooth and slightly blushed from crying. And her lips, soft and pink, slightly parted as she studied our hands.

I felt a strange flutter in my chest, like the glow of a fireplace or the warmth of the afternoon. It stayed there for a moment, playing

with my pulse.

I mentally chastised myself. How typical to become so infatuated with the first girl I was ever allowed to actually have any sort of feelings for. It was foolish, too quick to be real, and I pushed the warmth away. All the same, I didn't want to dismiss her. Time might prove that she was someone worth having in the running. America was clearly someone I'd need to win over, and that might take time. But I would start right now.

"If it would make you happy, I could let the staff know you prefer the garden. Then you can come out here at night without being manhandled by the guard. I would prefer if you had one nearby, though." No need to worry her with just how often we were attacked. So long as a guard was close, she should be fine.

"I don't . . . I don't think I want anything from you." She gently pulled her hand away and looked at the grass.

"As you wish." I was a little disappointed. What horrible thing had I done to make her push me away? Maybe this girl was unwinnable. "Will you be heading inside soon?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then I'll leave you with your thoughts. There will be a guard near the door waiting for you." I wanted her to take her time, but I dreaded some unexpected assault hurting any of the girls, even this girl who seemed to have developed a serious distaste for me.

"Thank you, um, Your Majesty." I heard a sort of vulnerability in her voice, and realized that maybe it wasn't me. Maybe she was just overwhelmed by everything that was happening to her. How could I blame her for that? I decided to risk rejection again.

"Dear America, will you do me a favor?" I took her hand once more, and she looked up to me with a skeptical face. There was something about those eyes on me, like she was searching for truth in mine and would have it at all costs.

"Maybe."

Her tone gave me hope, and I grinned. "Don't mention this to the others. Technically, I'm not supposed to meet you until tomorrow, and I don't want anyone getting upset." I gave a light snort, and I immediately wished I could take it back. Sometimes I had the *worst* laugh. "Though I wouldn't call you yelling at me anything close to a romantic tryst, would you?"

Finally America gave me a playful smirk. "Not at all!" She paused and let out a breath. "I won't tell."

"Thank you." I should have been happy enough with her smile, should have walked away at that. But something in me—perhaps being raised to always push forward, to succeed—urged me to take one step more. I pulled her hand to my lips and kissed it. "Good

night." I left before she had a chance to chastise me or I had an opportunity to do anything else stupid.

I wanted to look back and see her expression, but if it was something in the area of disgust, I didn't think I could bear it. If Father could read my thoughts right now, he'd be less than pleased. By now, after everything, I ought to be tougher than this.

When I got to the doors, I turned to the guards. "She needs a moment. If she's not in within half an hour, *kindly* urge her to come inside." I met both of their eyes, making sure they grasped the concept. "It would also behoove you to refrain from mentioning this to anyone. Understood?"

They nodded, and I made my way to the main stairwell. As I walked I heard one guard whisper, "What's *behoove*?"

I rolled my eyes and continued up the stairs. Once I made it to the third floor, I practically ran to my room. I had a huge balcony that overlooked the gardens. I wasn't going to step outside and let her know I was watching, but I did go to the window and pull back the curtain.

She stayed maybe ten minutes or so, seeming calmer by the minute. I watched as she wiped her face, brushed off her nightgown, and headed inside. I debated hopping into the hallway on the second floor so we could accidentally-on-purpose meet again. But I thought better of it. She was upset tonight, probably not herself. If I was going to have a chance at all, I'd have to wait until tomorrow.

Tomorrow . . . when thirty-four other girls would be placed before me. Oh, I was an idiot to wait so long. I went to my desk and dug out the stack of files about the girls, studying their pictures. I didn't know whose idea it was to put the names on the back, but that was far less than helpful. I grabbed a pen and transcribed the names to the front. Hannah, Anna . . . how was I supposed to keep that straight? Jenna, Janelle, and Camille . . . seriously? That was going to be a disaster. I had to learn at least a few. Then I'd just rely on the pins until I got the names straight.

Because I could do this. I could do it well. I had to. I had to prove, finally, that I could lead, make decisions. How else would anyone trust me as their king? How would the king himself trust me at all?

I focused on standouts. Celeste . . . I remembered the name. One of my advisors had mentioned she was a model and showed me a picture of her in a bathing suit on the glossy pages of a magazine. She was probably the sexiest candidate, and I certainly wouldn't hold that against her. Lyssa jumped out at me, but not in a good way. Unless she had a winning personality, she wasn't even in the running. Maybe that was a bit shallow, but was it so bad that I wanted someone attractive? Ah, Elise. Based on the exotic slant of her eyes, she was the

girl Father had mentioned who had family in New Asia. She'd be in the running on that alone.

America.

I studied her picture. Her smile was absolutely radiant.

What made her smile so brightly, then? Was it me? Had whatever she felt for me that day passed? She didn't seem very happy to meet me. But . . . she did smile in the end.

Tomorrow I would have to start fresh with her. I wasn't sure of what I was looking for, but so much of what seemed *right* was staring back at me in that photograph. Maybe it was her will or her honesty, maybe it was the soft skin on the back of her hand or her perfume . . . but I knew, with a singular clarity, that I wanted her to like me.

How exactly was I supposed to do that?

CHAPTER 6

I HELD THE BLUE TIE up. No. The tan? No. Was I going to have this much trouble getting dressed every day?

I wanted to make a good first impression with these girls—and a good second impression with one—and apparently I was convinced this all hung on picking out the right tie. I sighed. These girls were already turning me into a puddle of stupid.

I tried to follow my mother's advice and be myself, flaws and all. Going with the first tie I'd picked up, I finished getting dressed and smoothed my hair back.

I walked out the door and found my parents by the stairwell having a hushed conversation. I debated taking a back route, not wanting to interrupt them, but my mother waved me over.

Once I reached them, she started tugging on my sleeves, then moved to my back to smooth my coat. "Remember," she said, "they're swarming with nerves, and the thing to do right now is make them feel at home."

"Act like a prince," Father urged. "Remember who you are."

"There's no rush to make a decision." Mom touched my tie. "That's a nice one."

"But don't keep anyone around if you know you don't want them. The sooner we get to the true candidates, the better."

"Be polite."

"Be confident."

"Just talk."

Father sighed. "This isn't a joke. Remember that."

Mom held me at arm's length. "You're going to be fantastic." She pulled me in for a big hug, and backed away to restraighten everything.

"All right, son. Go on," Father said, gesturing to the stairs.

"We'll be waiting in the dining hall."

I felt dizzy. "Um, yes. Thank you."

I paused for a minute to catch my breath. I knew they were trying to help, but they'd managed to throw off any sense of calm I'd built. I reminded myself that this was just me saying hello, that the girls were

hoping this would work out as much as I was.

And then I remembered that I was going to get to speak to America again. At the very least, that should be entertaining. With that in mind I breezed down the stairs to the first floor and made my way to the Great Room. I took one deep breath and gave a knock on the door before pulling it open.

There, past the guards, waited the collection of girls. Cameras flashed, capturing both their reaction and mine. I smiled at their hopeful faces, feeling calmer just because they all looked so pleased to be here.

"Your Majesty." I turned and caught Silvia coming up from her curtsy. I nearly forgot that she would be there, instructing them in protocol the way she instructed me when I was younger.

"Hello, Silvia. If you don't mind, I would like to introduce myself to these young women."

"Of course," she said breathlessly, bending again. She could be so dramatic sometimes.

I surveyed the faces, looking for the flame of her hair. It took a moment, as I was a bit distracted by the light glinting off nearly every wrist, ear, and neck in the room. I finally found her, a few rows in on the end, looking at me with a different expression than the others. I smiled, but instead of smiling back, she looked confused.

"Ladies, if you don't mind," I started, "one at a time, I'll be calling you over to meet with me. I'm sure you're all eager to eat, as am I. So I won't take up too much of your time. Do forgive me if I'm slow with names; there are quite a few of you."

Some of the girls giggled, and I was happy to realize I could identify more of them than I thought I would. I went to the young lady in the front corner, and extended my hand. She took it enthusiastically, and we walked over to the couches that I knew would be set up specifically for this purpose.

Sadly, Lyssa was no more attractive in person than she was in her picture. Still, she deserved the benefit of the doubt, so we spoke all the same.

"Good morning, Lyssa."

"Good morning, Your Majesty." She smiled so widely, it looked like it must hurt her to do so.

"How are you finding the palace?"

"It's beautiful. I've never seen anything so beautiful. It's really beautiful here. Gosh, I already said that, didn't I?"

I answered with a smile. "It's quite all right. I'm glad you're so pleased. What do you do at home?"

"I'm a Five. My whole family works exclusively in sculpting. You have some incredible pieces here. Really beautiful."

I tried to seem interested, but she didn't engage me at all. Still, what if I passed on someone for no good reason?

"Thank you. Um, how many siblings do you have?"

After a few minutes of conversation in which she used the word *beautiful* no less than twelve times, I knew that there was nothing else I wanted to know about this girl.

It was time for me to move on, but it seemed so cruel to keep her here knowing there was no chance for us. I decided that I was going to start making cuts here and now. It would be kinder to the girls, and maybe also impress Father. After all, he did say he wanted me to make some real choices in my life.

"Lyssa, thank you so much for your time. Once I'm done with everyone, would you mind staying a little longer so I could speak with you?"

She blushed. "Absolutely."

We rose, and I felt awful knowing that she assumed that request meant something it didn't. "Would you please send the next young lady over?"

She nodded and curtsied before she went to get the girl beside her, who I recognized immediately as Celeste Newsome. It would take a dim man indeed to forget that face.

"Good morning, Lady Celeste."

"Good morning, Your Majesty," she said as she curtsied. Her voice was sugary, and I realized right away that many of these girls might have a hold on me. Maybe all this worry about not being able to love any of them wasn't the true problem. Maybe I'd fall for all of them and never be able to choose.

I motioned for her to sit across from me. "I understand you model."

"I do," she answered brightly, thrilled to see I already knew this about her. "Primarily clothing. I've been told I have a good shape for it."

Of course, at those words, I was forced to look at said shape, and there was no denying just how striking she was.

"Do you enjoy your work?"

"Oh, yes. It's amazing how photography can capture just a split second of something exquisite."

I lit up. "Absolutely. I don't know if you're aware, but I'm very into photography myself."

"Really? We should do a shoot sometime."

"That would be wonderful." Ah! This was going better than I thought. Within ten minutes I'd already weeded out a definite no and found someone with a common interest.

I could have probably gone on for another hour with Celeste, but if

we were ever going to eat, I really needed to hurry.

"My dear, I'm so sorry to cut this short, but I have to meet everyone this morning," I apologized.

"Of course." She stood. "I'm looking forward to finishing our conversation. Hopefully soon."

The way she looked at me . . . I didn't know the proper words for it. It sent a blush to my face, and I nodded my head in a tiny bow to cover it. I took some deep breaths, focusing myself on the next girl.

Bariel, Emmica, Tiny, and several others passed through. So far, most of them were pleasant and composed. But I was hoping for so much more than that.

It took five more girls until anything really interesting happened. As I stepped forward to greet the slim brunette coming my way, she extended her hand. "Hi, I'm Kriss."

I stared at her open palm and was prepared to shake it before she pulled it back.

"Oh, darn! I meant to curtsy!" She did, shaking her head as she rose.

I laughed.

"I feel so silly. The very first thing, and I got it wrong." But she smiled it off, and it was actually kind of charming.

"Don't worry, my dear," I said, gesturing for her to sit. "There's been much worse."

"Really?" she whispered, excited by the news.

"I won't go into details, but yes. At least you were attempting to be polite."

Her eyes widened, and she looked over at the girls, wondering who might have been rude to me. I was glad I'd chosen to be discreet, seeing as it was *last night* someone called me shallow, and that was a secret.

"So, Kriss, tell me about your family," I began.

She shrugged. "Typical, I guess. I live with my mom and dad, and they're both professors. I think I'd like to teach as well, though I dabble in writing. I'm an only child, and I'm finally coming to terms with it. I begged my parents for a sibling for years. They never caved."

I smiled. It was tough being alone.

"I'm sure it was because they wanted to focus all their love on you."

She giggled. "Is that what your parents told you?"

I froze. No one had asked a question about *me* yet.

"Well, not exactly. But I understand how you feel," I hedged. I was about to go into the rest of my rehearsed questions, but she beat me to it.

"How are you feeling today?"

“All right. It’s a bit overwhelming,” I blurted, being a bit too honest.

“At least you don’t have to wear the dresses,” she commented.

“But think of how fun it would have been if I had.”

A laugh tumbled out of her mouth, and I echoed it. I imagined Kriss next to Celeste, and thought of them as opposites. There was something entirely wholesome about her. I left our time together without a complete impression of her, since she kept pointing the conversation back to me, but I recognized that she was good, in the best sense of the word.

It was nearly an hour before I got to America. In the time between the first girls and her, I’d already met three solid standouts, including Celeste and Kriss, who I knew would be favorites with the public. However, the girl just before her, Ashley, was so dismally wrong for me she washed all of those thoughts out of my head. When America stood up and moved toward me, she was the only person on my mind.

Something about her eyes was mischievous, whether she meant it or not. I thought of how she acted last night, and I realized she was a walking rebellion.

“America, is it?” I joked as she approached.

“Yes, it is. And I know I’ve heard your name before, but could you remind me?”

I laughed and invited her to sit. Leaning in, I whispered, “Did you sleep well, my dear?”

Her eyes said I was playing with fire, but her lips carried a smile. “I am still not your dear. But yes. Once I calmed down, I slept very well. My maids had to pull me out of bed, I was so cozy.” She confessed the last bit like it was a secret.

“I am glad you were comfortable, my . . .” Ah, I was going to have to break this habit with her. “America.”

I could tell she appreciated my effort. “Thank you.” The smile faded from her face, and she fell into thought, absently chewing on her lip as she played with words in her head.

“I’m very sorry I was mean to you,” she finally said. “I realized as I was trying to fall asleep that even though this is a strange situation for me, I shouldn’t blame you. You’re not the reason I got swept up in all this, and the whole Selection thing isn’t even your idea.” *Glad someone noticed.* “And then, when I was feeling miserable, you were nothing but nice to me, and I was, well, awful.”

She shook her head at herself, and I noticed my heart seemed to be beating a bit faster.

“You could have thrown me out last night, and you didn’t,” she concluded. “Thank you.”

I was moved by her gratitude, because I already knew she was past

being anything close to insincere. Which brought me to a subject I had to broach if we were going to move forward. I leaned closer, elbows on my knees, both more casual and more intense than I'd been with the others already.

"America, you have been very up-front with me so far. That is a quality that I deeply admire, and I'm going to ask you to be kind enough to answer one question for me."

She gave a hesitant nod.

"You say you're here by mistake, so I'm assuming you don't want to be here. Is there any possibility of you having any sort of . . . of loving feelings toward me?"

It felt like she played with the ruffles on her dress for hours while I waited for her to answer, and I sat there convincing myself that it was only because she didn't want to seem too eager.

"You are very kind, Your Majesty." *Yes*. "And attractive." *Yes!* "And thoughtful." *YES!*

I was grinning, looking like an idiot, I'm sure, so pleased she managed to see something positive in me after last night.

Her voice was low as she continued. "But for very valid reasons, I don't think I could."

For the first time, I was grateful Father trained me so well to hold myself together. I sounded quite reasonable when I questioned her. "Would you explain?"

She hesitated again. "I . . . I'm afraid my heart is elsewhere."

And then tears appeared in her eyes.

"Oh, please don't cry!" I begged in a hushed voice. "I never know what to do when women cry!"

She laughed at my shortcomings and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. I was happy to see her just so, lighthearted and genuine. Of course there was someone waiting for her. A girl this real would have to have been snatched up quick by some very smart young man. I couldn't imagine how she ended up here, but that really wasn't my concern.

All I knew was, even if she wasn't mine, I wanted to leave her with a smile.

"Would you like me to send you home to your love today?" I offered.

She gave me a smile that was more like a grimace. "That's the thing . . . I don't want to go home."

"Really?" I leaned back, running my hand through my hair as she laughed at me again.

If she didn't want me, and she didn't want him, then what the hell *did* she want?

"Could I be perfectly honest with you?"

By all means. I nodded.

"I need to be here. My family needs me to be here. Even if you could let me stay for a week, that would be a blessing for them."

So she wasn't fighting for the crown, but I still had something she wanted. "You mean you need the money?"

"Yes." At least she had the decency to be ashamed of it. "And there are . . . certain people," she said with a meaningful look, "at home who I can't bear to see right now."

It took a second for it all to click. They weren't together anymore. She still cared about him, but she didn't belong to him. I nodded, seeing the predicament. If I could get away from the pressures of my world for a week, I would take it.

"If you would be willing to let me stay, even for a little while, I'd be willing to make a trade."

Now this was interesting. "A trade?" What in the world could she possibly offer?

She bit at her lip. "If you let me stay . . ." She sighed. "All right, well, look at you. You're the prince. You're busy all day, what with running the country and all, and you're supposed to narrow thirty-five, well, thirty-four girls, down to one? That's a lot to ask, don't you think?"

While it sounded like a joke, the truth was she cut to the core of my anxieties with absolute clarity. I nodded at her words.

"Wouldn't it be much better for you if you had someone on the inside? Someone to help? Like, you know, a friend?"

"A friend?"

"Yes. Let me stay, and I'll help you. I'll be your friend. You don't have to worry about pursuing me. You already know that I don't have feelings for you. But you can talk to me anytime you like, and I'll try and help. You said last night that you were looking for a confidante. Well, until you find one for good, I could be that person. If you want."

If I want . . . That wasn't an option, it seemed, but at least I could help this girl. And maybe enjoy her company a little bit longer. Of course, Father would be livid if he knew I was using one of the girls for such a purpose . . . which made me like it much, much more.

"I've met nearly every woman in this room, and I can't think of one who would make a better friend. I'd be glad to have you stay."

I watched as the tension melted from her body. Despite the knowledge that her affections were unattainable, I couldn't help but be drawn to try.

"Do you think that I could still call you 'my dear'?" I asked teasingly.

She whispered back, "Not a chance." Whether she meant it that way or not, it sounded like a challenge.

“I’ll keep trying. I don’t have it in me to give up.”

She made a face, almost irked but not exactly. “Did you call all of them that?” she asked, jerking her head toward the rest of the girls.

“Yes, and they all seemed to like it,” I replied, playfully smug.

The challenge in her smile was still there when she spoke. “That is the exact reason why I don’t.”

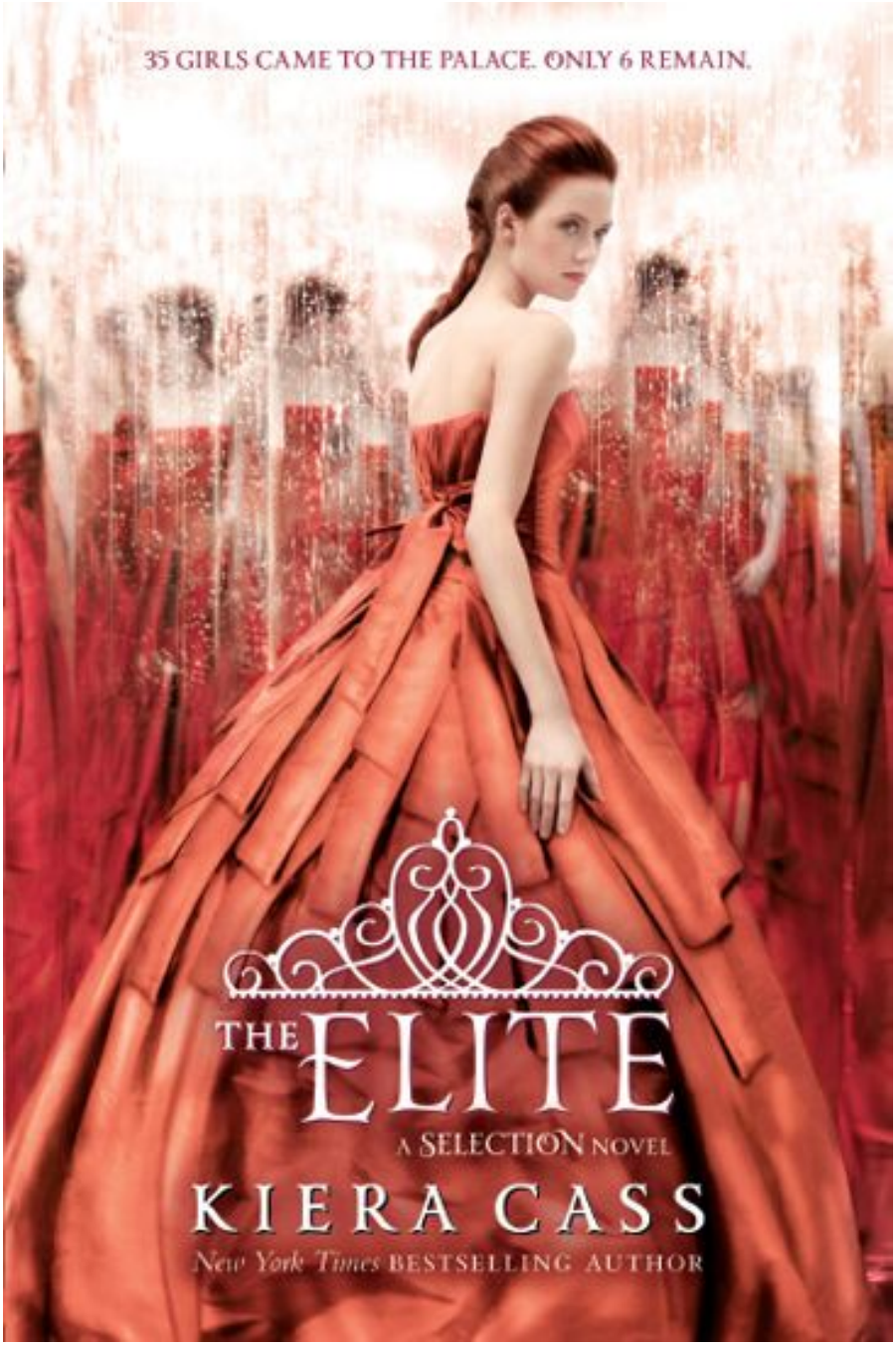
She stood, ending our interview, and I couldn’t help but be amused by her again. None of the others were eager to cut our time together short. I gave her a small bow; she answered with a rather rough curtsy, and walked away.

I smiled to myself thinking of America, measuring her against the other girls. She was pretty, if a bit rough around the edges. It was an uncommon type of beauty, and I could tell she wasn’t aware of it. There was a certain . . . royal air she didn’t seem to possess, though there was, perhaps, something regal in her pride. And, of course, she didn’t desire me at all. Still, I couldn’t shake the urge to pursue her.

And that was how the Selection did its first act in my favor: if I had her here, at least I had the chance to try.

Excerpt from *The Elite*

Keep reading for a peek at *The Elite*


35 GIRLS CAME TO THE PALACE. ONLY 6 REMAIN.
THE ELITE
A SELECTION NOVEL
KIERA CASS
New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHAPTER 1

THE ANGELES AIR WAS QUIET, and for a while I lay still, listening to the sound of Maxon's breathing. It was getting harder and harder to catch him in a truly calm and happy moment, and I soaked up the time, grateful that he seemed to be at his best when he and I were alone.

Ever since the Selection had been narrowed down to six girls, he'd been more anxious than he was when the thirty-five of us arrived in the first place. I guessed he thought he'd have more time to make his choices. And though it made me feel guilty to admit it, I knew I was the reason why he wished he did.

Prince Maxon, heir to the Illéa throne, liked me. He'd told me a week ago that if I could simply say that I cared for him the way he did for me, without anything holding me back, this whole competition would be over. And sometimes I played with the idea, wondering how it would feel to be Maxon's alone.

But the thing was, Maxon wasn't really mine to begin with. There were five other girls here—girls he took on dates and whispered things to—and I didn't know what to make of that. And then there was the fact that if I accepted Maxon, it meant I had to accept a crown, a thought I tended to ignore if only because I wasn't sure what it would mean for me.

And, of course, there was Aspen.

He wasn't technically my boyfriend anymore—he'd broken up with me before my name was even drawn for the Selection—but when he showed up at the palace as one of the guards, all the feelings I'd been trying to let go of flooded my heart. Aspen was my first love; when I looked at him . . . I was his.

Maxon didn't know that Aspen was in the palace, but he did know that there was someone at home that I was trying to get over, and he was graciously giving me time to move on while attempting to find someone else he'd be happy with in the event I couldn't ever love him.

As he moved his head, inhaling just above my hairline, I considered it. What would it be like to simply love Maxon?

"Do you know when the last time was that I really looked at the

stars?" he asked.

I settled closer to him on our blanket, trying to keep warm in the cool Angeles night. "No idea."

"A tutor had me studying astronomy a few years ago. If you look closely, you can tell that the stars are actually different colors."

"Wait, the last time you looked at the stars was to *study* them? What about for fun?"

He chuckled. "Fun. I'll have to pencil in some between the budget consultations and infrastructure committee meetings. Oh, and war strategizing, which, by the way, I am terrible at."

"What else are you terrible at?" I asked, running my hand across his starched shirt. Encouraged by the touch, Maxon drew circles on my shoulder with the hand he had wrapped behind my back.

"Why would you want to know that?" he asked in mock irritation.

"Because I still know so little about you. And you seem perfect all the time. It's nice to have proof you're not."

He propped himself up on an elbow, focusing on my face. "You *know* I'm not."

"Pretty close," I countered. Little flickers of touch ran between us. Knees, arms, fingers.

He shook his head, a small smile on his face. "Okay, then. I can't plan wars. I'm rotten at it. And I'm guessing I'd be a terrible cook. I've never tried, so—"

"Never?"

"You might have noticed the teams of people keeping you up to your neck in pastries? They happen to feed me as well."

I giggled. I helped cook practically every meal at home. "More," I demanded. "What else are you bad at?"

He held me close, his brown eyes bright with a secret. "Recently I've discovered this one thing. . . ."

"Tell."

"It turns out I'm absolutely terrible at staying away from you. It's a very serious problem."

I smiled. "Have you really tried?"

He pretended to think about it. "Well, no. And don't expect me to start."

We laughed quietly, holding on to each other. In these moments, it was so easy to picture this being the rest of my life.

The rustle of leaves and grass announced that someone was coming. Even though our date was completely acceptable, I felt a little embarrassed and sat up quickly. Maxon followed suit as a guard made his way around the hedge to us.

"Your Majesty," he said with a bow. "Sorry to intrude, sir, but it's really unwise to stay out this late for so long. The rebels could—"

“Understood,” Maxon said with a sigh. “We’ll be right in.”

The guard left us alone, and Maxon turned back to me. “Another fault of mine: I’m losing patience with the rebels. I’m tired of dealing with them.”

He stood and offered me his hand. I took it, watching the sad frustration in his eyes. We’d been attacked twice by the rebels since the start of the Selection—once by the simply disruptive Northerners and once by the deadly Southerners—and even with my brief experience, I could understand his exhaustion.

Maxon was picking up the blanket and shaking it out, clearly not happy that our night had been cut short.

“Hey,” I said, urging him to face me. “I had fun.”

He nodded.

“No, really,” I said, walking over to him. He moved the blanket to one hand to wrap his free arm around me. “We should do it again sometime. You can tell me which stars are which colors, because I seriously can’t tell.”

Maxon gave me a sad smile. “I wish things were easier sometimes, normal.”

I moved so I could wrap my arms around him, and as I did so, Maxon dropped the blanket to return the gesture. “I hate to break it to you, Your Majesty, but even without the guards, you’re far from normal.”

His expression lightened a bit but was still serious. “You’d like me more if I was.”

“I know you find it hard to believe, but I really do like you the way you are. I just need more—”

“Time. I know. And I’m prepared to give you that. I only wish I knew that you’d actually want to be with me when that time was over.”

I looked away. That wasn’t something I could promise. I weighed Maxon and Aspen in my heart over and over, and neither of them ever had a true edge. Except, maybe, when I was alone with one of them. Because, at that moment, I was tempted to promise Maxon that I would be there for him in the end.

But I couldn’t.

“Maxon,” I whispered, seeing how dejected he looked at my lack of an answer. “I can’t tell you that. But what I can tell you is that I *want* to be here. I *want* to know if there’s a possibility for . . . for . . .” I stammered, not sure how to put it.

“Us?” Maxon guessed.

I smiled, happy at how easily he understood me. “Yes. I want to know if there’s a possibility for us to be an us.”

He moved a lock of hair behind my shoulder. “I think the odds are

very high," he said matter-of-factly.

"I think so, too. Just . . . time, okay?"

He nodded, looking happier. This was how I wanted to end our night, with hope. Well, and maybe one more thing. I bit my lip and leaned into Maxon, asking with my eyes.

Without a second of hesitation, he bent to kiss me. It was warm and gentle, and it left me feeling adored and somehow aching for more. I could have stayed there for hours, just to see if I could get enough of that feeling; but too soon, Maxon backed away.

"Let's go," he said in a playful tone, pulling me toward the palace. "Better get inside before the guards come for us on horseback with spears drawn."

As Maxon left me at the stairs, the tiredness hit me like a wall. I was practically dragging myself up to the second floor and around the corner to my room when, suddenly, I was quite awake again.

"Oh!" Aspen said, surprised to see me, too. "I think it makes me the worst guard ever that I assumed you were in your room this whole time."

I giggled. The Elite were supposed to sleep with at least one of their maids on watch in the night. I really didn't like that, so Maxon insisted on stationing a guard by my room in case there was an emergency. The thing was, most of the time that guard was Aspen. It was a strange mix of exhilaration and terror knowing that nearly every night he was right outside my door.

The lightness of the moment faded quickly as Aspen grasped what it meant that I hadn't been safely tucked in my bed. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Aspen," I whispered, looking to make sure no one was around. "Don't be upset. I'm part of the Selection, and this is just how it is."

"How am I supposed to stand a chance, Mer? How can I compete when you only ever talk to one of us?" He made a good point, but what could I do?

"Please don't be mad at me, Aspen. I'm trying to figure all this out."

"No, Mer," he said, gentleness returning to his voice. "I'm not mad at you. I *miss* you." He didn't dare say the words aloud, but he mouthed them. *I love you.*

I melted.

"I know," I said, placing a hand on his chest, letting myself forget for a moment all that we were risking. "But that doesn't change where we are or that I'm an Elite now. I need time, Aspen."

He reached up to hold my hand in his and nodded. "I can give you that. Just . . . try to find some time for me, too."

I didn't want to bring up how complicated that would be, so I gave him a tiny smile before gently pulling my hand away. "I need to go."

He watched me as I walked into my room and shut the door behind me.

Time. I was asking for a lot of it these days. I hoped that if I had enough, everything would somehow fall into place.

CHAPTER 2

"NO, NO," QUEEN AMBERLY ANSWERED with a laugh. "I only had three bridesmaids, though Clarkson's mother suggested I have more. I just wanted my sisters and my best friend, who, coincidentally, I'd met during my Selection."

I peeked over at Marlee and was happy to find she was looking at me, too. Before I arrived at the palace, I had assumed that with this being such a high-stakes competition, there'd be no way any of the girls would be friendly. Marlee had embraced me the first time we met, and we'd been there for each other from that moment on. With a single almost-exception, we'd never even had an argument.

A few weeks ago, Marlee had mentioned that she didn't think she wanted to be with Maxon. When I'd pushed her to explain, she clammed up. She wasn't mad at me, I knew that, but those days of silence before we'd let it go were lonely.

"I want seven bridesmaids," Kriss said. "I mean, if Maxon chooses me and I get to have a big wedding."

"Well, I won't have bridesmaids," Celeste said, countering Kriss. "They're just distracting. And since it would be televised, I want all eyes on me."

I fumed. It was rare that we all got to sit and talk with Queen Amberly, and here Celeste was, being a brat and ruining it.

"I'd want to incorporate some of my culture's traditions into my wedding," Elise added quietly. "Girls back in New Asia use a lot of red in their ceremonies, and the groom has to bring gifts to the bride's friends to reward them for letting her marry him."

Kriss piped up. "Remind me to be in your wedding party. I love presents!"

"Me, too!" Marlee exclaimed.

"Lady America, you've been awfully quiet," Queen Amberly said. "What do you want at your wedding?"

I blushed because I was completely unprepared to comment.

There was only one wedding I'd ever imagined, and it was going to take place at the Province of Carolina Services Office after an exhausting amount of paperwork.

“Well, the one thing I’ve thought about is having my dad give me away. You know when he takes your hand and puts it in the hand of the person you marry? That’s the only part I’ve ever really wanted.” Embarrassingly enough, it was true.

“But everyone does that,” Celeste complained. “That’s not even original.”

I should have been mad that she called me out, but I merely shrugged. “I want to know that my dad completely approves of my choice on the day it really matters.”

“That’s nice,” Natalie said, sipping her tea and looking out the window.

Queen Amberly laughed lightly. “I certainly hope he approves. No matter who it is.” She added the last words quickly, catching herself in the middle of implying that Maxon would be my choice.

I wondered if she thought that, if Maxon had told her about us.

Shortly after, the wedding talk died down, and the queen left to go work in her room. Celeste parked herself in front of the large television embedded in the wall, and the others started a card game.

“That was fun,” Marlee said as we settled in at a table together. “I’m not sure I’ve ever heard the queen talk so much.”

“She’s getting excited, I think.” I hadn’t mentioned to anyone what Maxon’s aunt had told me about how Queen Amberly tried many times for another child and failed. Adele had predicted that her sister would warm up to us once the group was smaller, and she was right.

“Okay, you have to tell me: Do you honestly not have any other plans for your wedding or did you just not want to share?”

“I really don’t,” I promised. “I have a hard time picturing a big wedding, you know? I’m a Five.”

Marlee shook her head. “You *were* a Five. You’re a Three now.”

“Right,” I said, remembering my new label.

I was born into a family of Fives—artists and musicians who were generally poorly paid—and though I hated the caste system in general, I liked what I did for a living. It was strange to think of myself as a Three, to consider embracing teaching or writing as a profession.

“Stop stressing,” Marlee said, reading my face. “You don’t have anything to worry about yet.”

I was about to protest but was interrupted by a cry from Celeste.

“Come on!” she yelled, slamming the remote against the couch before pointing it at the television again. “Ugh!”

“Is it just me or is she getting worse?” I whispered to Marlee. We watched as Celeste hit the remote over and over before giving up and going to change the channel manually. I guessed if I had grown up as a Two, that would be something worth getting worked up over.

“It’s the stress, I think,” Marlee commented. “Have you noticed

that Natalie's getting, I don't know . . . more aloof?"

I nodded, and we both looked over to the trio of girls playing their card game. Kriss was smiling as she shuffled, but Natalie was examining the ends of her hair, occasionally pulling out a strand she didn't seem to like. Her expression was distracted.

"I think we're all starting to feel it," I confessed. "It's harder to sit back and enjoy the palace now that the group is so small."

Celeste grunted, and we peeked over at her but quickly averted our eyes when she caught us looking.

"Excuse me for a moment," Marlee said, shifting in her seat. "I think I'm going to go to the bathroom."

"I was just thinking the same thing. Do you want to go together?" I offered.

Smiling, she shook her head. "You go ahead. I'll finish my tea first."

"Okay. I'll be back."

I left the Women's Room, taking my time walking down the gorgeous hallway. I wasn't sure I would ever get over how spectacular it was here. I was so distracted that I ran smack into a guard as I turned the corner.

"Oh!" I said.

"Pardon me, miss. Hope I didn't startle you." He held me by my elbows, helping me regain my footing.

"No," I said, giggling. "It's fine. I should have been watching where I was going. Thanks for catching me. Officer . . ."

"Woodwork," he answered, giving me a quick bow.

"I'm America."

"I know."

I smiled and rolled my eyes. Of course he knew.

"Well, I hope the next time I run into you, it won't be quite so literal," I joked.

He chuckled. "Agreed. Have a nice day, miss."

"You, too."

I told Marlee about my embarrassing run-in with Officer Woodwork when I got back and warned her to watch her step. She laughed at me and shook her head.

We spent the rest of the afternoon sitting by the windows, chatting about home and the other girls as we drank in the sunshine.

It was sad to think about the future just then. Eventually the Selection would be over, and while I knew Marlee and I would still be close, I would miss talking to her every day. She was the first real friend I'd ever made, and I wished I could keep her beside me all the time.

As I tried to stay in the moment, Marlee gazed dreamily out the

window. I wondered what she was thinking about; but everything was so peaceful, I didn't ask.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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KIERA CASS is a graduate of Radford University and currently lives in Blacksburg, Virginia, with her family. Her fantasy novel the siren was self-published in 2009. Kiera has kissed approximately fourteen boys in her life. None of them were princes. You can learn more about Kiera's books, videos, and love of cake online at www.kieracass.com.

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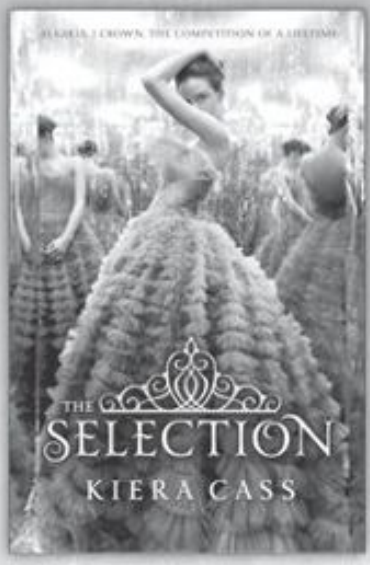
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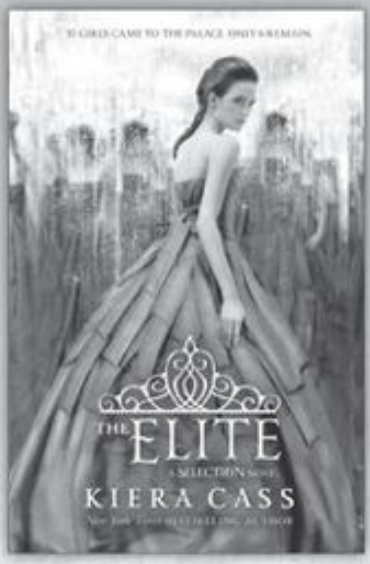
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